Student Learning Objective Three

Research Skills

During the fall semester of 2006, I completed an assignment titled “Issue Paper” for Dr. Rivas in SED 625. The assignment required that we each choose a topic of interest, some controversy and perhaps some applicability to our thesis. This topic was thoroughly researched and a general conclusion was reached regarding a final recommendation that took into consideration a minimum of five studies. The topic I chose was whether project-based learning was effective for English learners. I knew that my thesis would involve both English learners and project-based science and saw the issue paper as an opportunity to begin my literary review. The assignment required that we obtain peer reviewed journal articles that specifically addressed our topic, or “issue”.

Through the assignment, I found and read five articles that were explicitly about project-based science and literacy. I also read a book about language development in a content classroom. The articles were difficult to find and the assignment taught me how to rephrase searching criteria. The assignment also taught me how education journal papers are categorized and assigned key words. I found many articles that were not peer reviewed, but did not use them. The five journal articles that I located contain very different studies and the assignment taught me how to succinctly sum up such diverse and complex studies. The assignment also taught me how to synthesize the conclusions from the varying studies and present them in a written form with all their nuances and limitations. This was a particularly useful skill because some of the articles were contradictory and yet common threads could be found throughout the studies. I felt that my research yielded good background knowledge in the field of project-based science and literacy. This research was very useful later when I began the literary review for my thesis.

I often use project-based units in my classroom. I also have a near 100% English learner student population. This particular assignment provided me with great insight into my existing practices. Due to
my research, I adapted and changed many parts of my project-based units. For example, after the issue paper, I added a mandatory vocabulary section to all project-based units with many opportunities for students to draw, write in their native language, as well as write in English. I looked for explicit connections between the project-based units and the lives of my English language learners. I tried to make the units as personal as possible. The modifications made were due to my research findings that showed the differences between successful project-based units and not so successful ones.

This research also encouraged me to create new project-based units that took into account my new findings. As a Master’s candidate I feel it is important to take the initiative in creating lessons and implementing them based on research. I am far more suspicious of claims that are made by numerous merchants of sure-fire methods to instantaneously turn my students into little geniuses. I realize now that educational claims often may be supported by some research, but often, the whole picture is missing or incomplete. I feel that as a Master’s candidate I have a certain amount of expertise in evaluating research and instructional materials that claim to be research based. I know the fine line of sample selection, control groups, demographics and statistically significant results.

The assignment was a great learning experience for me on many levels. As a student I learned how to thoroughly conduct research about a very specific topic. As a teacher, I learned a lot about project-based science and my English language learners. As a Master’s candidate I feel very comfortable offering my opinion to others regarding conducting research or planning an effective project-based unit.